

The Grapevine

Xeriscaping: a water-wise approach to landscaping

Our relief from the heat was unfortunately short lived and the rainfall amounts across the area were not enough to help with the worsening drought conditions in the area. With the hot and dry conditions that have persisted in the area starting from last fall and running through this year there has been an increased interest in alternative lawn and landscaping practices both in the area and across the country. These collective practices are commonly termed “xeriscaping” which was coined by a group in Colorado to describe landscaping where water conservation is the main focus. Whatever you chose to do in your lawn, make sure it follows all city codes and requirements.



Xeriscaping was coined from the Greek word “xeros” meaning dry and scape which means the pattern of landscape. A well planned out xeriscape will result in an attractive, sustainable landscape that conserves water and is based on sound horticultural principles. There are many ways to develop and create a water-wise landscape from reducing the amount of lawn area to auditing your watering practices to using mulches to cover the ground and finally using plants that tolerate heat and drought conditions. The first step to creating a water wise lawn is to start with a plan that balances your aesthetic needs as well as your desire to conserve resources. Just a reminder, xeriscaping means reduce water usage not zero maintenance.

One of the biggest aspects of xeriscaping is reducing the amount of irrigated turf in your yard through a couple options. Xeriscaping doesn’t mean no turf, just well thought out areas such as removing hard to irrigate locations and tight corners that are hard to mow. The first option is to convert turf areas into alternatives that require less water to maintain. Keep the lawn grass in areas where it is functional including spots that have fair amounts of traffic or areas for pets and children to play. Transition steep slopes that are harder to water to groundcovers instead of turf. The second option is to transition the lawn to a grass option such as buffalograss or bermudagrass that requires less moisture than the traditional bluegrass or fescue yard. Turfgrass has it’s benefits in a water-wise landscape including reducing run-off and environmental pollution while also moderating the temperature in the area. It’s also important to remember you don’t have to water the lawn unless it’s absolutely necessary.



Auditing your watering practices can make a big difference in the amount of water you are using as proper irrigation can reduce water usage by 30-80%. Consider transitioning to soaker hoses or drip irrigation in flower beds to only water the areas necessary rather than sprinklers. If you use a sprinkler system, make sure your system is adequately covering the area desired and adjust if necessary. If possible, change your irrigation system from watering everything to just watering in zones as some areas of the yard won’t need as much water as others. Remember to water deeply and infrequently rather than shallow watering, trees and shrubs should be watered to a depth of 12-18” while lawns should be watered do a depth of 6-8” each time.

In any landscaping make sure to cover as much of the ground as possible with some type of mulch to reduce evaporation and help keep the soil temperature cooler. If you need to improve your soil consider using an organic mulch such as bark chips or shredded mulch to add organic material to the soil. Rock and inorganic mulches will also work in most options. You will ultimately need to choose what works for you and is readily available in your area. I didn’t talk about plants in this article simply because they are a topic all on their own so look for that information in a future Grapevine. These are simply the first steps to being water wise in your home landscape and many can be done without any changes to your current landscaping.

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Pollinator Plant of the Week-

This week's pollinator of the week is the Black-eyed Susan or *Rudbeckia hirta*. The Black-eyed Susan is a native of the United States and the Great Plains. It can commonly be found in open woodlands, prairies, fields and in waste areas across the state. While technically a perennial this flower tends to be a short-lived plant in some areas, however it freely self-seeds so it rarely dies out. The common name originates in an old English poem called '*Sweet Williams Farewell to Black-eyed Susan*' which talks about how the Sweet William plant and Black-eye Susan bloom so beautifully together. The Black-eye Susan is known for its daisy like flowers with petals that range in color from bright yellow to burgundy red and several different combinations in between. All varieties do have the characteristic dark brown to black cone in the center that gives the flower its name. Black-eyed Susans are a fairly hairy plant, the species name *hirta* means hairy and refers to the short bristles on the leaves and the stem. This pollinator plant has few insect or diseases issues outside of the occasional bout of powdery mildew under very humid conditions. Use this plant in wildflower or cottage gardens as a mass of color for the best effect or use shorter varieties as a border of a flower bed.



Insect of the Week-

This week's insect is the Elm Leaf Beetle. These beetles are a common insect that loves to feed on the leaves of Elm trees and is wreaking havoc on trees across the area. Both the larvae form of this insect and the adult feed on the leaves of Elm trees, primarily Siberian and English elms, leaving distinct damage to the leaves. The larvae are small black caterpillar or grub like and feed on the underside of the leaves, avoiding the main veins which "skeletonizes" the leaves that eventually fall to the ground. The adults have two different colors depending on if they are the overwintering adult or that recently hatched. The overwintering adults are khaki green in color, spend the winter in or around buildings and can be a nuisance pest of households. In the spring the beetles that survived the winter become active and search for elm trees on which to feed or lay eggs. As they feed they change colors to the yellow with black stripes as seen in the picture to the right. There typically are two life-cycles of these insects in our area before they overwinter for the year. Luckily these beetles are fairly easy to control either via systemic or spray. There are several active ingredients that are effective as a spray including carbaryl, permethrin, Spinosad and bifenthrin. The main systemic active ingredient is imidacloprid which should be used with caution but is very effective.



Problem of the Week-

This week we are talking about the Cottontail rabbit. These cute little critters can be a major pest of the back yard and garden if care isn't taken to prevent them from gaining a foothold in your location. These bunnies will produce 3 to 4 litters of babies every year from late winter till early fall and they can quickly become a problem. Cottontails prefer brushy cover interspersed with open areas as their main habitat. Abundant growth during the spring and summer provides the rabbits with all the food and cover they need. In the winter, when food is limited, rabbits eat twigs and gnaw the bark of woody plants. This is why young trees and seedlings need to be protected from rabbits during the winter months. Landscaped yards provide excellent rabbit habitats, accounting for the prevalence of cottontails in most suburban and urban areas. Keeping bunnies out of your garden can be a challenge, the best method is to exclude them using a chicken wire fence that is approximately 2' tall so they can't get into the area. Trapping bunnies and moving them to a rural location is the second-best method but this can be difficult during periods of succulent growth. Repellents are typically not extremely effective and often can't be sprayed on plants used for food. A final control option is a motion activated sprinkler system to scare the rabbits away from the area.



Reminders-

- Continue to pick bagworms off as you see them. Once bagworms reach 1-2” in length they are hard to control with a spray.
- August 15th is the last day to fertilize warm season lawns for the year.
- Water lawns and flower beds 1-2 times or approximately 1” of moisture every week.
- Scout for Fall Armyworms. They haven’t been spotted yet but early detection prevents more damage.
- Break open the webs of fall webworm to allow birds and natural predators to help remove those pests if needed.

Upcoming Events

- *August 3, 2022: Landscaping for Wildlife*
How you landscape your property and the plants you select can create a welcome invitation for wildlife to visit your property. Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent, will discuss basic landscaping concepts that will encourage wildlife to visit your yard. Learn about recommended native plant material to utilize, as well as key management techniques that will provide benefits to many different wildlife species. The KSRE Garden hour sessions are held via Zoom starting at noon. For more information or to register [click here](#).
- *August 4, 2022: Turf and Ornamental's Field Day @ John Pair Research Center*
The field day program is designed for all segments of the turf & ornamentals industry - lawn care, athletic fields, golf courses, landscape, nursery, and grounds maintenance. Included on the program are research presentations, problem diagnosis, commercial exhibitors, and equipment displays. There will be time to see current research, talk to the experts and get answers to your questions.
- *August 6, 2022: John Pair Open House*
For more than 50 years, the John C. Pair Horticultural Research Center in Haysville, KS has been studying trees, shrubs, flowers, turfgrass, fruits, vegetables -- and now even industrial hemp -- to see which varieties grow best in Kansas. K-State plant researchers at the Pair Center have looked for the greenest turf grasses, maple trees with the best fall color, the toughest evergreen trees, the most drought tolerant plants, and more in order to recommend the best plants to grow in the weather extremes of Southcentral Kansas. The John C. Pair Horticultural Research Center will host a public Open House on Saturday, Aug. 6 from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- *August 20, 2022: Nature in your Neighborhood- An Urban Conservation Workshop*
This workshop will cover a variety of topics from how to choose the best tree or plant for your location to composting and improving your backyard for our native pollinators and birds. Join the Butler County Master Gardeners, the Butler County Conservation District and K-State Research and Extension for Nature in Your Neighborhood, an environmental stewardship partnership. Call our office at 316-321-9660 to register to make a rain barrel. Rain barrels are limited to the first 25 to register. Cost is \$15 for the rain barrel, workshops are free.